

Chapter One

Apocalyptus Interruptus

Christianity, Sodomy, and the End

Walking out of the library of Regent University in Virginia Beach, Virginia, the private Christian fundamentalist school founded in 1977 by televangelist and onetime Republican presidential hopeful Pat Robertson, students and visitors are confronted by a monumental stone and welded-steel sculpture of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse by Cyd Chambers Players. The sculpture's terrifying subject strikes a contrast to the meticulously landscaped campus with its elegant neo-Georgian brick architecture: Ivy League Doomsday. The apparent contradiction of two styles—nostalgic idealization of the Early Republic and urgent expectation of the end-time—aptly represents the paradox and the persuasiveness of American apocalypticism. The son of a United States senator and an alumnus of Yale, Robertson has built a communications empire, beginning with his flagship daily television program, *The 700 Club*, by providing his electronic flock with prophetic interpretations of current events and with oracular utterances warning of God's imminent wrath. His personal wealth and the sophistication of his business, educational, and philanthropic operations should put to rest the notion that apocalyptic or millennialist beliefs are the sign of the clinically delusional or of rural snake-handlers. Indeed, many Americans believe that the nation is poised on the brink—of the abyss or of the new age or of both. In the last two decades of the twentieth century, AIDS and American homosexuals would preoccupy their apocalyptic fantasies.

In 1981 the headlines "Disease Rumors Largely Unfounded" and "Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals" (the first reports of what would

eventually be called “AIDS”), entered a cluttered discursive landscape. The rhetoric of American religious conservatives in the late 1970s—most visibly the political action group “Moral Majority” and television evangelists like Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell—had already constructed homosexuality itself as a contagious disease and as an apocalyptic signifier, a sign of the “end times.”¹ During the first AIDS decade, the coincidence of male homosexuality with a hideously fatal infectious agent intensified this apocalyptic rhetoric, not only among Christian fundamentalists but also within those groups most affected by AIDS. Throughout the 1980s and into the second decade of the epidemic, HIV/AIDS affected/infected culture workers attempted to wrest control of hostile apocalyptic images by appropriating them for their own purposes. That two opposed groups in American cultural politics could each employ the same tropes for competing ideological purposes attests both to the pervasiveness of apocalypticism in American culture and to the resilience of its signs. This book will draft a map of that discursive landscape on which AIDS partisans conducted their forays equally against the social effects of the medical syndrome and against the religious rhetoric employed to stigmatize the syndrome and those affected by it. The purpose of this study is to provide both an account and a critique of apocalyptic discourse on behalf of the HIV/AIDS affected/infected through a historicist social semiotic analysis of various discursive forms: fiction, drama, performance art, mixed media art, video, film, graphics, journalism, and biomedical discourse and will examine four salient apocalyptic tropes: exile, the prophetic utterance known as the jeremiad, sacred warfare or Armageddon, and paradisaal bliss.

FUNDAMENTALISM, SODOMY, AND APOCALYPTICISM

In the second half of the 1970s religious conservatives in the United States began to consolidate their cultural and political power around the diffuse social anxieties of “middle Americans” who had been characterized earlier in the decade as a “silent majority.” Among the “hot button” issues were gender and sexuality, particularly in the forms of North American feminism and gay rights activism. White males increasingly perceived themselves as competing for dwindling economic power with women as well as with people of other races and ethnicities. A more visible and vocal gay and lesbian activism, then increasingly supported by

some progressive politicians and religious leaders, began to make inroads into local and national politics. Christian fundamentalists, already politically conservative and increasingly allied with monied interests, began to oppose one particular strain of progressivism—activism for gay and lesbian equal rights.

Nowhere was this reaction more evident than in Anita Bryant's nationally publicized 1977 campaign to repeal the Dade County, Florida, gay equal rights ordinance. In her own account of the "Save Our Children" campaign—initially unsuccessful, but eventually effective in repealing the ordinance through a public referendum—Bryant recalled a conversation with her pastor, William Chapman, after the ordinance was first passed by the Metro Dade Commission:

Brother Bill stopped whistling and looked at us and said, "You know what it is?" He paused, noticing that we were finally relaxing. "God has given us a *space to repent*." "How do you know that?" I asked him. "Revelation, chapter 2, verse 21. The writer had been describing the wicked prophetess Jezebel, and then he says: 'And I gave her space to repent of her fornication; and she repented not.' Remember, the Book of Revelation is a book of prophecy. America is being given time—a space to repent. . . . One of two things will come to pass, Anita. . . . There will be revival or ruin."²

"Brother Bill"'s reading of the "signs of the times," events leading for some to a crisis of identity and meaning, is characteristic in two respects: homosexuality is read as a harbinger of catastrophe, even the ultimate catastrophe, and the present moment is figured as a binary opposition or crisis—revival or ruin. Bryant had apparently perceived the latter (the campaign after all was to "Save Our Children") and had begun to elaborate on the former. In her remarks on *The PTL Club*, televangelist Jim Bakker's daily program, Bryant offered this historical exegesis:

We know that the once-powerful Roman Empire gradually rotted from within and fell to barbarian invaders; just so, our civilization is headed for destruction unless we change our present course. We felt that we had to take a stand along with other concerned Miamians. We are faced with an aggressive social *epidemic* [emphasis mine] in this country, but, praise God, I do believe in the decency of the American people, and I believe this downward trend can be reversed . . .

Later that month she would appear with a similar message on Pat Robertson's daily television program, *The 700 Club*.³ Homosexuality was thus imagined as a plague-like epidemic threatening the entire American body.

While Bryant may have been one of the most visible proponents of the view that homosexuality is a precursor of a society's collapse or apocalypse, she was by no means its sole advocate. In the previous decade, Israel's successful capture of the city of Jerusalem in the 1967 Six-Days War prompted renewed Christian fundamentalist apocalyptic speculations. Well over a thousand international delegates, among them Anita Bryant and C. Everett Koop, the future Reagan-appointed Surgeon General when AIDS was first identified, met in the Holy City for a 1971 prophecy conference. One of the speakers at the conference, Harold John Ockenga, compared his time in history with that of the biblical Noah, but contended that the modern world was even more ripe for apocalyptic destruction:

Here, in addition to the conditions of the days of Noah, we have perversions of sex, including sodomy, homosexuality and Lesbianism. Strange as it may seem, these movements have now come out in the open, are demanding recognition in society as legitimate, and are being portrayed for us on the screen and in the theater. Many people are turning to sexual perversion.

Ockenga cited the years 1965 to 1970 as having been a particular turning point in the West's decline. Another conference speaker, Wilbur Smith, related changing sexual attitudes to Jesus' prophecy about the end times:

There is one aspect of this present lawlessness which I believe for the first time in modern history relates world conditions to a certain prophecy of our Lord recorded exclusively in Luke's gospel: "Likewise even as it came to pass in the days of Lot; they ate, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they builded; but in the day that Lot went out from Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven, and destroyed them all: after the same manner shall it be in the day that the Son of man is revealed" (17:28–30, ASV). In regard to this matter of eating, drinking, buying, selling, planting and building, there is nothing here that is not normal for mankind, nothing in itself of a sinful nature, nothing which would warrant the terrible destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. We must turn back to the book of Genesis, to the description of those conditions of these cities of the plain, that led to this divine destruction. It was nothing else but homosexuality,

normally called until recent times by a much uglier word deriving from Sodom's name.

Within two years of the Stonewall riots, homosexual visibility had become a serious concern for Christian fundamentalists.⁴

During the 1970s, probably the best known American evangelical Christian was David Wilkerson, author of a book immensely popular among born-again Protestants, *The Cross and the Switchblade*. According to David Edwin Harrell, "no man's voice carried more authority in the charismatic revival" than Wilkerson. In a 1974 book, Wilkerson narrated a detailed vision of five calamities that he claimed to have received from God. Wilkerson prophesied:

The sin of Sodom will again be repeated in our generation. Of all the sins Sodom was guilty of, the most grievous of all were the homosexual attacks by angry Sodomite mobs attempting to molest innocent people. Mass murderers have become commonplace in our generation. We witnessed the television news coverage of the Olympic massacre. Mass murder sprees have become so frequent that they are now almost taken for granted. The world is no longer shocked by these tragedies as in the past. The Bible says: "As it was in the days of Lot, so shall it also be in the days of the coming of the Son of Man." I have seen things in my vision which make me fear for the future of our children. I speak of wild, roving mobs of homosexual men publicly assaulting innocent people in parks, on the streets, and in secret places. These attacks by Sodomite mobs are certain to come, and, although they may not be publicized as such, those in the law-enforcement circles will know the full extent of what is happening.

Wilkerson engaged a conspiratorial paranoia that alleged the certainty of these events, even though they may occur "in secret places" and "may not be publicized as such." This free associated "vision" remarkably elided sodomy with murder, a linkage Wilkerson made even more explicitly in his section entitled, "A Homosexual Epidemic":

There are only two forces that hold back homosexuals from giving themselves over completely to their sin, and they are rejection by society and the repudiation and teachings of the church. When society no longer rejects their sin as abnormal and fully accepts them and encourages them in their abnormality, and when the church no longer preaches

against it as sin and consoles them in their sexual activities—there no longer exist any hindering forces. The floodgates are open, and homosexuals are encouraged to continue in their sin. In my vision, I have seen these two roadblocks being swept away. When that which hinders is taken away, chaos will follow. Believe me when I tell you the time is not far off that you will pick up your local newspaper and read sordid accounts of innocent children being attacked by wild homosexual mobs in parks and on city streets. The mass rapes will come just as surely as predicted in the Gospels. I see them coming in our generation. Twenty-seven boys were murdered in Houston, Texas, by a small homosexual gang. This sordid news story is the beginning of many other such tragic outbreaks. You can expect more than one homosexual scandal in very high places. The homosexual community will become so militant and brazen that they will flaunt their sin on television talk shows very shortly. Very clearly, I see homosexuals coming out in mass numbers and deviate sex crimes becoming more numerous and vicious.

Of course, since then, much more has been flaunted on television talk shows than militant and brazen homosexuality, most of it having to do with heterosexual eroticism, and where precisely in the gospels a prophecy of such events can be found is not clear. Wilkerson's rhetorical demonizing alloyed sensationalist references to news events with parental anxieties about their children's safety and the white middle class's apprehensions about rioting mobs; the admixture was effective in creating a sense of urgency and terror. It was a remarkable blend of biblical proof texts with supermarket tabloid rhetoric.⁵

Wilkerson was not the first religious writer to equate homosexuality with epidemic disease, nor was he the last. One widely published and popular evangelical fundamentalist, Tim LaHaye, wrote in 1978 that "America is experiencing a homosexual epidemic" and interpreted Israelite history to contend that the Babylonian captivity was in part the result of homosexuality. He claimed that "many Bible scholars think one of the major sins that brought on the Flood was homosexuality" and offered a fairly detailed historiographic inventory of homosexually-decadent societies including Pompeii, Rome, Athens, and post-World War II Britain. LaHaye was explicit in his apocalyptic reading of homosexuality: "Most Bible prophecy scholars teach that we are either in 'the last days,' predicted in the Scriptures, or we are very close to them. Interestingly enough, homosexuality is to be a part of the buildup of the 'perilously evil times' that are prophesied for the last days."⁶

Similarly, in *Power in the Blood: A Christian Response to AIDS*, David Chilton quoted Rousas John Rushdoony's 1973 *The Institutes of Biblical Law*: "Homosexuality is thus the culminating sexual practice of a culminating apostasy and hostility towards God. The homosexual is at war with God, and, in his every practice, is denying God's natural order and law. The theological aspect of homosexuality is thus emphasized in Scripture. In history, homosexuality becomes prominent in every age of apostasy and time of decline. It is an end of an age phenomenon." Another early fundamentalist tract on homosexuality, David A. Noebel's *The Homosexual Revolution: A Look at the Preachers and Politicians Behind It*, cited both biblical and historiographic authority:

Scripture makes it exceeding clear that homosexuality is a mark of social decline. History records that the Greek, Roman, Persian and Moslem civilizations declined as homosexuality became more prevalent within those cultures. Homosexuals have a tendency to turn against their parent society if it does not succumb to homosexuality. They will subvert their own nation if they consider it to be too moral or anti-homosexual. The American public must make its decision: Will America maintain a Biblical valued system and move toward moral health and restoration, or will She follow other civilizations on the road to paganism and decay?

Here again, the historical moment was presented as a crisis in the terms of two irreconcilable opposites.⁷ A California Congressman, William Dannemeyer, writing later in the decade, would repeat the historiographic claim that:

[I]n the greatest of civilizations, there is usually a common thread at the end, a corruption of spirit that leads to selfishness and preoccupations with pleasure, eventually to the exclusion of what is usual and normal. At that point, excess and perversion come into fashion, and after that—catastrophe. There are numerous examples of such decadence, and at the end of great civilizations you almost always find homosexuality—widespread, energetic, enormously proud of itself.

He also offered Rome, the Mayan civilization, Venice, and Weimar Germany as exemplars of homosexually-induced decline.⁸

After the scandal-driven collapse of Bryant's Protect America's Children and Anita Bryant Ministries, her executive director wrote in 1984:

The road to ruin for America has been paved by the political homosexual militants. Their program is conceived in wickedness. Their platform is morally perverse. They would lead America to disaster, just as their ancient counterparts led Sodom to its certain doom.

America was typologically configured as both Sodom and ancient Greece, and homosexuality or even only tolerance of homosexuality leads it along the “road to ruin,” thus simultaneously constructing a crisis and demonizing homosexuals. Rowe read homosexual behavior—even the social tolerance of homosexual behavior—as not simply a harbinger of the end times but even as the cause of such an apocalyptic rupture in American history. Beyond this historical exegesis, what makes Rowe’s account even more interesting than Bryant’s, is its further demonization of homosexuals as “anti-God, anti-Christ, anti-Bible, anti-moral, anti-life, anti-constitutional and anti-American.”⁹

APOCALYPTIC DISCOURSE

The readiness of HIV/AIDS affected/infected culture workers to employ a religious discourse typically associated with groups who stigmatized both AIDS and the earliest visible victims of the syndrome, gay men, indicates some of the resilience of this ancient discursive form as well as its pervasiveness in American cultural life. The “slipperiness” of apocalypticism—its ability to serve competing ideologies—may be produced by the polysemous character of religious discourse generally. Pierre Bourdieu in *Language and Symbolic Power* claimed that “The polysemy of religious language, and the ideological effect of the *unification of opposites* or denial of divisions which it produces, derive from the fact that, at the cost of the *re-interpretations* implied in the production and reception of the common language by speakers occupying different positions in the social space, and therefore endowed with different intentions and interests, it manages to speak to all groups and all groups speak it.” Robert Hodge might agree without making special claims for religious language:

[S]imilar forms can be used by non-dominant groups as strategies of resistance, which are no more (and no less) compromised by this similarity than is the case with ideological complexes in the discourse of the dominant. . . . [W]e clearly cannot assume a single automatic value of

'dominant' or 'resistant' for any ideological form. Instead we need to accept contradiction and instability as the typical features of ideology as it appears in discourse, in criticism and in literature.¹⁰

The master's tools might not disassemble the master's house, but see what work can be done with them! Apocalyptic discourse is particularly effective in promoting group solidarity by engaging the individual and collective sense of threat and crisis. Early in the epidemic, AIDS was a crisis for those immediately affected by it as well as those who simply viewed its spectacle. The apocalypse is equally at home at the service of radicals and reactionaries.

Apocalypticism, according to Barry Brumett, has "undergirded Western thought for centuries, embodied in such central secular ideas as progress, manifest destiny, economic growth, and scientific advance" as well as in the obvious religious contexts. M. H. Abrams alternatively argues that the resilience of this form in Western culture may result in part from the pervasiveness of the Bible in the production of Western texts. Similarly, Brumett points out that "[a]pocalyptic is not the *only* way to deal with looming disorder, but it is a venerable and important one." Millennialism, the belief in the possibility of a perfect society either through a benign divinity (the faith of Christianity) or benign economic and historical forces (the faith of both Marxism and capitalism), and the revolutions necessary to produce such utopian conditions have been attributed to apocalyptic ideologies. However, I would caution against reading apocalyptic discourse only for revolutionary or protorevolutionary ideologies since millennialism can also be used to support the established order in crisis, which according to Ernest R. Sandeen, is apparently at work in the regressive politics of Christian fundamentalism and implicit in fundamentalism's apocalyptic roots.¹¹

In particular, I am interested in how apocalyptic discourse constructs the "identity" and cohesiveness of a community under stress in such a way that a group has one instrument to negotiate with the volatility of a crisis. I see apocalyptic discourse constructing this identity in two related ways: by deploying a series of binary oppositions, which proceed from Self/Other, and by employing anxieties about physical defilement as one means of enforcing the binary oppositions. The binaristic character of apocalyptic discourse has been widely noted. Paul Ricoeur suggested that this dualistic character derives first from mythic notions of theogonic combat, in which the world is created by a battle; with the introduction

of the Hebrew Genesis myth of benign origins, this combat is transposed into the historical realm (i.e., the king and his enemies). Charles Lippy proposes that:

apocalyptic groups emerge with tight boundaries, and a strong sense of their corporate identity and distinctiveness, a view of the universe as a battleground between forces of good and evil (with evil momentarily holding the upper hand), and an intense concern to protect pure believers from constant attack by polluting forces.¹²

The construction of identity by means of a series of binary oppositions (e.g., Self/Other, Us/Them, sacred/secular) is then reinforced by the representation of physical defilement.

Apocalyptic texts frequently betray a preoccupation with physical purity and a concomitant anxiety about physical defilement, including defiling excrements and disgusting smells. Couliano observes that “Zoroastrianism translates this entire series of binary oppositions into olfactory terms, that is, fragrant as opposed to foul.” Furthermore, he notes “how frequently crimes derive from pollution and to what extent punishment is olfactory.” In constructing the Self by means of demonizing the Other, apocalyptic discourse relishes almost obsessively the forms of defilement leading to punishments that consist of further physical defilement:

The main sins seem to be sexual, but not all are. Thus, we find in hell Sodomites; women who touched water and fire while menstruating; men who copulated with women during their menstrual period; adulterous women; people who urinated while standing; . . . people who did not take a ritual bath after polluting water and fire . . . Most of these unfortunate inmates of hell, in fact, gorge themselves with excrement . . . elsewhere we find women hung upside down, with ‘the semen of all kinds of demons,’ stench, and filth poured continuously into their mouths and noses, for having denied their husbands intercourse.

In the *Apocalypse of Peter*, an apocryphal second-century Christian text, mothers who killed their children have a ceaseless flow of milk from their breasts that “congeals and smells foul, and from it come forth beasts that devour flesh, which turn and torture them for ever.” Usurers find themselves in a “great lake, full of discharge and blood and boiling mire.” The “discharge and the excrement of the tortured” runs down to form a lake, where women who had children out of wedlock are consigned. The

fourth-century *Apocalypse of Paul* describes in detail the stench of the well of the abyss to which heretics are consigned.¹³

Not only the ancient texts but later medieval and early modern apocalyptic discourses achieved a voyeuristic obsession with the details of infernal punishments that bordered on the pornographic, as Bernard Capp suggested in the case of one early English Protestant:

The symbol of evil, seductive Whore of Babylon (Rev. xvii) sometimes stirred darker, subconscious passions. They are all too clear, for example in Thomas Brightman's wish to "see this impudent harlot at length slit in the nostrils, stripped of her garments and tires [attire], besmeared with dirt and rotten eggs, and at last burnt up and consumed with fire."

Ricouer noted that the "inflation of the sexual is characteristic of the whole system of defilement, so that an indissoluble complicity between sexuality and defilement seems to have been formed from time immemorial." It is as though all sexuality is defiling, but some must be sanctioned or permitted, albeit controlled:

Do not the marriage rites, among others, aim to remove the universal impurity of sexuality by marking out an enclosure within which sexuality ceases to be a defilement, but threatens to become so again if the rules concerning times, places, and sexual behavior are not observed?

Ricouer pointed out the association of sexuality with contamination, and the archaic linking of vengeance with defilement, so that defilement produces dread. Dread of vengeance for a "violated interdict" sees suffering as a symptom or product of sin, providing the typical theodicy of both prophetic and apocalyptic discourse. This theodicy ("Bad things happen to bad people") is predominant in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, though only paradoxically so, since the scriptural traditions of both Christians and Jews explicitly acknowledge that sometimes bad things happen to good people. And the notion that tribulations will touch the faithful is a staple of American apocalypticism as far back as the New England Puritans.¹⁴ The identity of the social collective or of the individual within that collective is jeopardized by the blurring or transgression of boundaries, which are for the most part arbitrary. Thus in the irreducible logic of the economy of defilement, heretics are sexual "deviates," sexual "deviates" are heretics, and so both must ingest excreta; painting the demonic Other requires a broad (often excrement-soaked) brush.

Julia Kristeva made this point in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*: “It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.” The defilement of body materials like urine, blood, sperm, excrement “collapse the border between inside and outside” but are simultaneously repulsive and fascinating. Social collectives, in her view, manage defilement by a series of rituals and taboos in order to construct collective identity, negotiating between sublimation and perversion at their crossing in religious practice. In particular for an understanding of the binary operation of apocalyptic discourse, Kristeva offers the interesting observation that Christian apocalypticism shares with earlier Semitic traditions “[a]n identical sacred horror for the feminine, the diabolical, and the sexual . . . by means of an incantation whose particular prosody confirms the name of the genre: a discovering, a baring of truth.” Kristeva generalizes on this notion when she asserts:

On close inspection, all literature is probably a version of the apocalypse that seems to me rooted, no matter what its socio-historical conditions might be, on the fragile border (borderline cases) where identities (subject/object, etc.) do not exist or only barely so—double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject.¹⁵

This phenomenology applied to the apocalyptic discourses of AIDS, I would argue, represents a psychosocial dynamic that was at work throughout the 1970s in the increasing visibility and articulation of homosexual desires and homosexual bodies, prompting some people to repulse or abject violently these homosexual signs. American Christian fundamentalists felt imperiled by the convulsive social changes in the 1960s and 1970s, especially around issues of gender and sexuality. Even before the “epiphany” of AIDS, religious conservatives had already employed lurid images of homosexual defilement and the binary oppositions of apocalyptic discourse. Both configurations intensified with the gradually wider public awareness of the medical syndrome around 1983 precisely because discussions of its transmission had to take into account the remarkably diverse range of human sexual behaviors, which included public discourse about body fluids and products, traditionally defiling substances.

Because this book examines how HIV/AIDS affected/infected culture workers in New York City appropriated apocalyptic tropes in an

effort to resist or reverse them, I need to provide an account of this discourse and its associated ideologies in a particular and concrete historical situation. To do so I will employ a critical method that accounts for genre, form, and the concrete social and historical givens of specific texts, a critical method that allows for useful generalizations without losing the particularities. In what follows, I will briefly summarize some of the more incisive critiques of AIDS apocalypticism and explain the social semiotic analysis that will provide the critical tools for this study.

AIDS, APOCALYPTICISM, AND CULTURE CRITICISM

Culture workers of HIV/AIDS affected/infected communities appropriated apocalyptic tropes in their own resistive discourse. From mainstream authors to activists and biomedical journalists to performance artists, this cultural production employed various apocalyptic commonplaces: universal destruction, beastly and demonic evil, conspiracy theories, tropes of plague and pestilence, images of blood and defilement, jeremiadic and oracular utterances, narratives of otherworldly journeys and messengers, and fantasies of utopic or paradisaic reunion. However, not all culture analysts found this apocalyptic rhetoric appropriate or useful in the struggle for advocacy on behalf of those living with AIDS.

By the early 1990s queer apocalyptic representations of AIDS were ubiquitous, and the facility with which gay men in particular adopted an apocalyptic stance to manage the implications of the epidemic was not without its critics. Gay writer and activist Darrel Yates Rist's antiapocalyptic 1989 article, "AIDS as Apocalypse: The Deadly Costs of an Obsession," pointed out that "[T]his panicky faith that all of us are doomed cries down the sobering truth that it is only a minority of homosexuals who've been stricken or ever will be, leaving the rest of us to confront not so much the grief of dying as the bitterness, in an oppressive world, of staying alive."¹⁶ Rist suggested that the rhetoric was counterproductive and more than a little dishonest. Similarly, in *AIDS and Its Metaphors* Susan Sontag pointed out the postmodern paradox of the intensification of apocalyptic rhetoric contrasted with the simultaneous deferral of an actual apocalyptic rupture. This premillennialism is symptomatic of the postmodern condition: "Apocalypse is now a long-running serial: not 'Apocalypse Now' but 'Apocalypse from Now On,' a postmodernity particularly typical of American culture. Analogously, she associated this

apocalypticism with “an end-of-an-era feeling” prevalent in our culture and intensified by AIDS. Both apocalyptic discourse and *fin de siècle* style are homologous of catastrophe and only catastrophe: “That even an apocalypse can be made to seem part of the ordinary horizon of expectation constitutes an unparalleled violence that is being done to our sense of reality, to our humanity.” However, Sontag’s analysis on this point is weakened because she employed “apocalypse” only in its most limited (though popular) sense of cataclysm; thus she failed to see its recuperative possibilities. She also confused entropic *fin de siècle* style with utopic apocalypticism, blending post-Romanticism with Judaeo-Christian eschatology, seeming to elide significant differences between European and American discourses and cultures.¹⁷

Other culture critics were inclined, like Rist and Sontag, to interrogate the apocalyptic significations of AIDS. James Miller remarked that “Without faith to limit apocalyptic fantasy, hell hardly differs from history as constructed on the nightly news.” He proposed the “anastatic moment . . . the illuminative climax of the personal or public struggles of the bereaved to make sense of death” as a critical term to understand what is going on in many representations of AIDS. For Miller, the anastatic moment is a kind of resurrection (without explicit religious faith) and he examined the reinvention of heaven in several AIDS elegies in which Fire Island is figured as Paradise. Miller’s article was dedicated to the memory of Michael Lynch, fellow Canadian and AIDS activist who died in 1991. Too debilitated with AIDS-related illness to present a paper at the 1988 Modern Language Association Convention, Lynch instructed that his paper, entitled “Terrors of Resurrection ‘by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’ ” be presented *in absentia* by Sedgwick, his Duke University colleague. Lynch argued the need for alternatives to apocalyptic discourse in AIDS writing, which are problematic because of “[T]heir distance from lives as led.” He suggested that there is even some resistance to viewing AIDS as anything but apocalyptic, a resistance to viewing HIV infection as simply another (manageable) disease (the article was written during the hopeful introduction of one of the first HIV drugs, AZT). The challenge for Lynch was viewing AIDS “[N]ot as apocalypse now, nor as apocalyptic from now on, but as getting the FDA and the NIH to expedite treatments, as working out manageable workloads with employers or thesis supervisors, as figuring out ways to cope with recurrent nausea, as figuring out ways to get down a *whole* peanut butter sandwich, as making time, not serving it.” Lynch resisted producing a cosmic meaning around HIV infection

and AIDS, and viewed the syndrome instead as a medical management issue. Peter Dickinson's "'Go-go Dancing on the Brink of the Apocalypse': Representing AIDS" offered a critique of "abstract theorizing about AIDS," suggested that neither AIDS nor apocalypticism exists outside of the discursive practices that represent it, and performed a "taxonomy of the various modes of apocalypse at work in the discursive production of AIDS—from the marketing of apocalypse by biomedicine and the media to the ironizing of apocalypse by gay activists and artists—paying particular attention to the representation of identity and difference, safer sex, and persons living with AIDS and HIV." In each instance, culture critics have noticed that both the political right (whom one might expect to employ biblical tropes) and the political left (whom one might be surprised to find using scriptural figures) have employed apocalyptic discourses, but have done so at a price to the people living under the threat of AIDS.¹⁸

Feminist critics have also applied their own interventions to apocalyptic discourses, observing the ways in which those discourses are typically scripted around sexual-defilement and gender anxieties. Their attitudes toward apocalypticism, however, are quite varied. Catherine Keller's theological *Apocalypse Now and Then* suggests that one can "remain accountable . . . to the cultural hunger for a spirituality that might actually compete with apocalyptic fundamentalisms on behalf of sustainable and shared life in the present. This means at least taking the biblical text seriously." Her project is to recuperate the liberatory possibilities of apocalypticism for marginalized people. She does not imagine an end of endism, an apocalypse of apocalypticism, but hopes instead to revise the text. By contrast, in *Apocalyptic Bodies: The Biblical End of the World in Text and Image*, Tina Pippin attempts to resist rather than revise these texts. She is fascinated and repulsed by the Book of Revelation's treatment of women's bodies, but also fascinated by its queerly ambiguous treatment of men's bodies. However, she concludes that its "message is still not liberating for our late twentieth-century feminist and pro-gay liberation movements. Of course, I am using twentieth-century language and terms to define a first-century world view. I make this hermeneutical leap because I want to figure out how to read the Apocalypse in this century of genocide and Aids."¹⁹ Similarly, in two concise and carefully argued texts, *Anti-Apocalypse: Exercises in Genealogical Criticism* and *Millennial Seduction: A Skeptic Confronts Apocalyptic Culture*, Lee Quinby employs a feminist commitment with Foucauldian analysis. In *Anti-Apocalypse*, she observes the dual

possibilities of apocalypticism: mobilization or passivity. Like Tina Pippin she regards apocalyptic discourses with suspicion and her goals in this earlier book are to analyze and resist the antidemocratic tendencies that she views as intrinsic to these discourses. Unlike Keller, however, Quinby imagines an end of endism, the apocalypse of apocalypticism. In what she characterizes as “pissed criticism” she examines the apocalyptic anxieties of physical/sexual defilement that coalesced about AIDS and “bodily fluids.” Her later book, *Millennial Seductions*, offers Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America* as a paradigm for moral education, with its “threshold of revelation” challenging “both the fatalistic view that nothing can be done to change the world and the relativistic view that the moral standing of a given act depends on the moral belief of the actor, regardless of consequences to others.” Quinby advances her antiapocalypticism as an antidote to apocalypticism’s antidemocratic script, which in recent years the Religious Right has employed against gender and sexual pluralism.²⁰

The most extensive critical treatment of AIDS and apocalypticism is Richard Dellamora’s *Apocalyptic Overtures: Sexual Politics and the Sense of an Ending*. Dellamora argues that

[T]he association of sex between men with end times is embedded in the political unconscious of Christian societies. Accordingly, when persecution of such subjects increases at moments, such as the ends of centuries, when cultural anxieties about time become intensified, such responses are due not only to immediate but also to atavistic factors.

The instances of this conjunction and the fact that both dominant groups and subordinate groups employ apocalyptic discourse for their own purposes lead Dellamora to express caution in their reading and to invoke both Derrida and Foucault. Deconstruction for Dellamora is both a site of apocalyptic theory and its critique; in the West, philosophy “[A]lways occurs within an apocalyptic metadiscourse” about the “ends of man” that is often universalized, while Derridean deconstruction offers both an analytic and an affirmative moment: “The first is necessary in order to resist the manipulative use of apocalyptic discourse. The second is necessary in order to mobilize the discourse on behalf of subordinated individuals and groups.” Foucault offers a similarly binary “tactical productivity” and “strategic integration” as terms of the analysis of discourse.²¹

These analytical tools acknowledge both the democratic and the totalitarian possibilities of apocalypticism. Dellamora applies them to

nineteenth-century fin de siècle sensibility, twentieth-century gay/queer writing, and representations of AIDS or AIDS-era writing, the last including Neil Bartlett's 1988 novel *Who Was That Man? A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde*, Edmund White's 1986 short story, "An Oracle," and Andrew Hollinghurst's 1988 novel invoking a pre-AIDS past, *The Swimming Pool Library*.²² More than any other critic, Dellamora recognizes both the utopic and the entropic possibilities in apocalyptic discourse, and emphasizes the pervasiveness of this discourse in American social and political life. His analysis makes explicit in a way no other critic has done the coincidence of Western apocalyptic narrative and homosexual anxieties.

At the same time, however, Dellamora constructs his analysis upon texts that seem to me atypical of American writing: British or European for the most part, rather than North American—Bartlett, Wilde, Pater, Hollinghurst, the early Burroughs, the part-time expatriate White. And Derridean deconstruction, all protests to the contrary notwithstanding, dehistoricizes texts and reads them for what they "might do" rather than for what they "have done." Deconstruction in this case does not provide an adequately pragmatic analysis of AIDS and apocalypticism. To me, Dellamora's most satisfying chapter is the three-page "Afterword," where he recounts attending a performance of David Drake's *The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me* and where Dellamora defines the effects that the play—and its concluding apocalyptic turn—produced upon him and other audience members, while he contextualizes the play in its material performance space: a nineteenth-century West Village police stable, converted into a theater a few years after Stonewall, and later renovated and dedicated to queer theater in 1988. His account at that point engages a world outside of the text—or a world, perhaps, in which the text is enlarged—where texts are more than verbal and are written on bodies and buildings as much as in books. It is precisely such an examination of the material effects of discourses on real bodies that interests me here, and for this reason I propose that a historicist social semiotics might make a valuable contribution to the critical analysis of AIDS discourses that has been advanced thus far.²³

SOCIAL SEMIOTICS

Making a claim for a formal identity over time and across cultures among texts employing similar discursive structures and conventions, requires a

theoretical account of an apocalyptic genre, while at the same time an effective praxis demands an account that is not reductively formalistic or dehistoricized. Although there is no essential “form” of apocalypse, and although no monolithic or univocal definition of the term has successfully prevailed in scholarly discourse, there is a widely accepted sense of “family resemblances” that construct the apocalyptic genre. Attention to points of resemblance, however, can lead to a formalistic and taxonomic analysis of texts and performances that reduces difference and evades their material historic contingencies. Social semiotics is one critical tool that evades formalism, while accounting for the conventions that constitute genre, by attending to the historical materiality of texts and performances and by acknowledging that “style” is an ideological construction rather than the object of aesthetic contemplation. Social semiotics can also be applied to a range of discursive practices (verbal texts, performance, iconic visual arts) because all discourses are viewed as situated on the larger landscape of the social production of meaning, while their contradictions are understood as inherent in social negotiations of identity and power, solidarity and exclusion.²⁴ This study, for example, will examine not only “literary” texts and other verbal (including journalistic and biomedical) texts, but also performance art, films, ACT-UP demonstrations and graphics, and other visual arts in an attempt to assess the tactical and strategic instrumentality of apocalyptic discourse in particular cases.

At the base of a semiotic analysis is the recognition that

[T]exts are both the material realization of systems of signs, and also the site where change continually takes place. The dialectic between text and system always occurs in specific semiotic acts, that is, in discourse. Discourse in this sense is the site where social forms of organization engage with systems of signs in the production of texts, thus reproducing or changing the sets of meanings and values which make up a culture.²⁵

In the continuous exchanges between dominant groups and dominated groups there occurs affirmation of, accommodation of and resistance to values, meanings, and behaviors. (The seemingly facile dichotomizing of the social site into “dominant” and “dominated” belies the complex subjectivity of postmodern urban life, in which individuals might inhabit simultaneously several dominant and dominated subject positions, while perceiving themselves as inhabiting still others.) Both Christian funda-

mentalists and the HIV/AIDS affected/infected will have understood themselves as “dominated” by a destructive hegemony that threatens their very existence, and in this study I will explore how the latter group has employed apocalyptic discourse derived not only from the immediate discursive field of American sexual politics in the late 1970s and early 1980s, but also from a more extensive cultural pattern in American society.

In the first decade of the AIDS epidemic this contestatory site and its competing ideologies produced “ideological complexes,” that is to say “a functionally related set of contradictory versions of the world, coercively imposed by one social group on another on behalf of its own distinctive interests or subversively offered by another social group in attempts at resistance in its own interests,”²⁶ operating within the set of rules called a “logonomic system.” Logonomic systems establish identity and solidarity and enforce power by controlling the production of meaning:

[W]ho can think and say what to whom in what way, and who or what is excluded from discourse and knowledge. This control is exercised by rules, implicit or explicit, concerning the major elements of the semiotic process: producers and receivers, texts and topics. Rules concerned with these can be termed *production regimes*, *reception regimes*, *genre regimes*, and *noetic regimes* respectively.²⁷

Apocalyptic discourse (like all discourse but more ostentatiously so, perhaps) produces social identity, cohesion, and coherence by its construction of subjects and objects (or often, objects). However, despite the implication of “control . . . by rules” the semiotic process is not mechanistically determined; therefore “[s]ocial semiotics cannot assume that texts produce exactly the meanings and effects that their authors hope for: it is precisely the struggles and their uncertain outcomes that must be studied at the level of social action, and their effects in the production of meaning.”²⁸

One task of this study will be to interrogate specific cultural productions in a specific place and time in order to determine the effects of social action. Within logonomic systems, genre regimes covertly engage production and reception and noetic regimes by adjudicating, not simply the classification of existing texts, but behavior and thought, how authors write and readers interpret, what they should write and read about; thus genre regimes classify more than existing texts but also classify people—“readers and writers—and . . . what they write or read about and what

they should think and mean,” producing both ideology and identity. Apocalypticism has a cultural history as a genre, a genealogy that is not accidental to its ideological freight and social effects, nowhere more so than in its American configurations.²⁹

Material texts (and performances similarly) do not exist in isolation but are situated in a context or domain, that is “categories of place associated with kinds of meaning and kinds of semiotic agent.”³⁰ Thus *domain* will become a useful critical category of this study in two ways: examining the transformation of apocalyptic tropes from an explicitly Christian religious domain to a variety of secularized domains; and examining differences among those secularized domains (as, for example, in the second chapter’s critique of a novel about a performance artist; a high-profile, nationally known off-Broadway performance piece; and an “alternative” performance piece).³¹ Similarly, the analysis of textual style, rather than an object of the formalist’s gaze, is a critique of ideology, since

The more distinctive (different, marked) the style of a text or genre, the more strongly the existence of an anti-group is signaled, conscious of its opposition to other groups in society, so that high stylization is a transparent signifier of high polarization and conflict. And secondly, the meanings coded in form and style will be core meanings in dispute that organize group against group, so that this class of meanings is indispensable to a comprehensive analysis of intellectual movements in a social history of thought.³²

The significance of apocalyptic “style” is fundamentally concerned with group identity and solidarity, the construction of authorized “authors” and initiated “readers,” partly through its extreme and allegorical tropes.³³

AMERICAN APOCALYPTICISM

Apocalypticism is one possible response to threats to group identity and cohesion. That apocalyptic discourse should typify some Americans’ response to epidemic disease is not surprising given its pervasiveness throughout American history. Numerous critics and historians have argued that apocalypticism was a founding motive and a foundational discourse of the Spanish and English settlement of the Americas and particularly of the New England colonies, which was continued through their cultural and intellectual dominance up until the early twentieth century.³⁴ When

Americans resort to defining social turning points in terms of catastrophic crisis, we are engaging in apocalyptic discourse. When we redefine our commitments to social action by declaring metaphorical (and sometimes literal) *war*, as for example the War on Poverty, the War on Drugs, the War on Terrorism, even the War to End All Wars, we are engaging in apocalyptic discourse. When we define social and political boundaries in binary *oppositions*, inevitably naming a demon or hunting a witch, we are engaging in apocalyptic discourse. When we construct our past and fantasize our future in terms of a prophetic and utopic *mission*, we are engaging in apocalyptic discourse. One does not need to believe in a religion or its prophecies to reproduce the language of apocalypticism. This mode of constructing meaning has become naturalized in our national language. Seventeenth-century Puritan apocalypticism has a remarkably long half-life, continuing to radiate most American discourse as we begin the twenty-first century.³⁵

Composing an American apocalyptic genealogy fulfills two functions: to identify the ideological and discursive headwaters of today's millennialism and to suggest affinities between past and current deployment of those fluid beliefs and languages, in particular the conflation of apocalyptic desires, sexual anxieties, and contagion. One might trace such ancestors beginning with the first European colonization of the Americas. In part Christopher Columbus' prophetic pretensions impelled his westward exploration on behalf of Spanish monarchs who had only recently expelled the last Moorish infidels and Jews from their kingdom.³⁶ Jonathan Goldberg has ably described the antisodomitical violence of both the Spanish and English colonizers in the Americas, who conflated racial difference with sexual and religious difference, rendering the native Other as both sodomitical and heretical.³⁷

To his discussion I would graft an understanding of the characteristically *apocalyptic vehemence* that energizes colonial antisodomitical violence, especially in the New English colonies.³⁸ Earnest Cassara argues that the New England Puritans exercised a cultural dominance that persists in some vestiges today, particularly in many Americans' belief in their divinely ordained mission. Cassara points out that Puritan "[i]ntolerance was part of their contract with God. They had moved across the ocean to erect in New England the English church in purified form. To maintain that purity in the face of both internal and external threats, intolerance became state policy." Tuveson makes the same point when he characterizes Christian apocalypticism as possessing a dualism

with no room for middle ground, a belief in tribulation prior to victory, in condoning purging violence, and in a progressive view of history, as well as in manifest destiny, as the nineteenth century would phrase it. Moreover, the Puritans tended to view keeping the community free of defilement not simply as an ethical ideal, but as an existential necessity: a question of survival or doom. As Kathleen Verduin observes: "Reinforcing a world view essentially punitive in nature, New England ministers like Danforth and the Mathers linked sexuality with deeper, indeed fundamental, threats: atheism, paganism, and apocalyptic judgment."³⁹

American apocalyptic expectations were quickened from the time of Cotton Mather, Jonathan Edwards, and the Great Awakening earlier in the eighteenth century toward the time of the Revolutionary War. Robert Fuller suggests that many colonists would have identified the Antichrist with the Church of Rome and in particular its French surrogates in North America; but after the French and Indian War, the British king himself came to be characterized as the beast. As Lakshmi Mani observes, "During the Revolutionary era, the American Revolution came to be hailed on both sides of the Atlantic as the millennium," a phenomenon Henry F. May characterized as a "Secular Millennialism." According to J. F. Maclear numerous apologists for the Revolution sought "to locate the new American nation in a grand apocalyptic interpretation of universal history, the only conceptual framework acceptable to a people still rooted in the providential assumptions of the English Reformation." By the time of the early republic, a literary as well as a religious apocalypticism was firmly in place.⁴⁰

Epidemic disease represented in terms of apocalyptic panic is characteristic of one of the Early Republic's first novels: Charles Brockden Brown's *Arthur Mervyn*, published in 1799 and 1800 and based on the Philadelphia yellow fever epidemic of 1793. Philadelphia at the time was the new republic's seat of government and an economically and culturally significant capital as well.⁴¹ As J. H. Powell has remarked in his history of the first epidemic, "The yellow fever, before the death of the young men whose first plague was 1793, became the most thoroughly written-about disease in medicine. . . . Philadelphia's great plague, the first of a long series, attracted all the writers of medical history. It attracted other writers, too, those who saw moral and humanistic values in the plague." Norman S. Grabo indicates that Brown began the novel about two years after the epidemic, which he had witnessed during that summer, in a series of sketches that appeared in the Philadelphia *Weekly Magazine*. Publication of these installments was interrupted by another outbreak of

yellow fever, which claimed the life of *Weekly Magazine* editor, James Watters, and Brown was to fall victim to a milder form of the fever after fleeing to New York City. In the eleventh installment we get a glimpse of Brown's ideological purposes that would later be appropriated into the novel when "The Man describes to a group of friends an act of ruthless political terrorism that silently and dreadfully destroys its enemies in silence, terror, and dread—a social allegory of the yellow fever itself. Clearly, Brown is indicating his awareness that the epidemic is social and moral as well as physical."⁴²

The novel falls roughly into two parts, both of them first-person narratives, first by a Dr. Stevens telling what Mervyn told him, and then by Mervyn himself. Mervyn has come to Philadelphia from the countryside in order to seek his fortune, but is almost immediately exploited and conned. The innocent Mervyn travels to the city where he undergoes trials and testing, comes near death before being rescued by Dr. Stevens, and finally prevails over evil and arrives at marriage.

A major binary opposition of the novel is that between rural and urban settings. Mervyn ponders the differences between the two:

I mused upon the incidents related by Estwick, upon the exterminating nature of this pestilence, and on the horrors of which it was productive. I compared the experience of the last hours, with those pictures which my imagination had drawn in the retirements of *Malverton*. I wondered at the contrariety that exists between the scenes of the city and the country; and fostered with more zeal than ever, the resolution to avoid those seats of depravity and danger.⁴³

The city is the place of vice and plague that eventually infects the countryside. Brown refers to the city variously as "seat of infection" (128), "theatre of disasters," and "theatre of pestilence" (132), emphasizing the spectacular aspects of epidemic disease. The city is also a place of shifting identities and loyalties, whereas the country is generally the site of stability and community. Brown also constructs an opposition between truth and lies or honesty and dishonesty. The rural innocent, Mervyn attempts to read the slippery signifiers of the city, to pin down the ambiguous codes of a person's character. Even the currency that becomes a significant plot device may be "queer," since there is doubt whether it is genuine or forged. What is worse, with the onset of the epidemic, ties of friendship and family are abandoned:

The usual occupations and amusements of life were at an end. Terror had exterminated all the sentiments of nature. Wives were deserted by husbands, and children by parents. Some had shut themselves in their houses, and debarred themselves from all communication with the rest of mankind. The consternation of others had destroyed their understanding, and their misguided steps hurried them into the midst of the danger which they had previously laboured to shun. Men were seized by this disease in the streets; passengers fled from them; entrance into their own dwellings was denied to them; they perished in the public ways. The chambers of disease were deserted, and the sick left to die of negligence. None could be found to remove the lifeless bodies. Their remains, suffered to decay by piece-meal, filled the air with deadly exhalation, and added tenfold to the devastation. (122–23)

The city is thus a place of both moral and medical contagion from which the pristinely innocent countryside must defend itself.

Brown and his contemporaries made a variety of attempts to explain the source of the fever and to construct a meaning for the society afflicted with it. While many blamed outsiders (French emigrés from the revolution, Caribbean immigrants), a consensus developed attributing a local source. Mathew Carey's contemporary account suggested that:

Luxury, the usual, and perhaps inevitable concomitant of prosperity, was gaining ground in a manner very alarming to those who considered how far the virtue, the liberty, and the happiness of a nation depend on its temperance and sober manners. . . . Not to enter into minute detail, let it suffice to remark, that extravagance, in various forms, was gradually eradicating the plain and wholesome habits of the city. And although it were presumption to attempt to scan the decrees of heaven, yet few, I believe, will pretend to deny, that something was wanting to humble the pride of a city, which was running on in full career, to the goal of prodigality and dissipation.

As John C. Miller pointed out in his study of the Alien and Sedition Acts, several years later *Greenleaf's New Daily Advertiser* would emphasize the depth of America's declension, blaming America's flirtation with French Jacobinism (as it saw it): "[W]e are a divided people, a degraded, insignificant, effeminate, dastardly race of beings, ready for the yoke." Alan Axelrod suggests that:

Arthur Mervyn . . . is a vision of the dis-ease of civilization in the New World. Brown, who had begun his literary career idly dreaming uto-

pias, created in his most detailed portrait of an American city a plague-smitten, apocalyptic vision of an antiutopia, in which the only real sources of social relationship lie in a monetary system liable to counterfeiting and imposture or in sexual alliances smuggled into town as the counterfeiting fantasies of the asocial wilderness mind.

The contemporary apocalyptic construction of the yellow fever epidemic is apparent in Carey's account when he relates:

Some of the Maryland papers relate, that 'a voice had been heard in the streets of Philadelphia, warning the inhabitants to prepare for their doom, as written in the prophet Ezekiel, ch. 27.' The Marylander who heard this voice, was certainly gifted with a most extraordinary ear, as, at the distance of above a hundred miles, he heard what we could not hear on the spot. And it would appear that his *sight* was equally good with his hearing; for he *saw* two angels conversing with the watch. It is true, he is too modest to say, he saw them himself—he only says 'two angels were *seen* conversing with the watch at midnight, about the subject of what the voice had previously proclaimed.'

Carey's ironic tone aside, contemporary accounts could read the epidemic as both punishment and warning.⁴⁴

Yellow fever further destabilized the early republican government in a nation already imagining itself vulnerable to French Jacobinism, an anxiety eventually taking expression in the Alien and Sedition Laws. In June 1800 the *Gazette of the United States* proclaimed that, "'Our cities have been punished in proportion to the extent of Jacobinism; and in general at least three out of four of the person who have perished by pestilence have been over zealous partizans.'" As Shirley Samuels has pointed out, "the novel in this period reveals itself finally as a major locus for contemporary anxiety about the stability of the family and its freedom from unfaithfulness and the contamination of the outside world. Timothy Dwight, for example, configured Jacobin democracy [as] . . . a form of the yellow fever plague that had so terrorized Americans at the time of the Terror in France." In such a construction, ideology is contagious, and freedom of speech or freedom of representation is a threat to civic order, which is to say, civic identity. In colonial and early republican America, and today with remarkable continuity, our public discourse has coalesced around a ready-made repertoire of tropes of contamination and obliteration.⁴⁵

The first fifteen years of AIDS representations showed a striking similarity to *Arthur Mervyn's* "conflation of plague, politics, and sexual

anxieties.”⁴⁶ Numerous culture workers, activists, and others involved with AIDS appropriated this apocalyptic genealogy in New York City and other urban areas, between 1981 (the year of the disease’s discursive epiphany) and 1996, the first decade and a half of the medical crisis. Since New York is both a prolific American cultural and discursive space, as well as an epicenter of the AIDS epidemic, it provides a rich venue for understanding the cultural production of meaning around this epidemic. But any focus entails two fictions that I must acknowledge now: a fiction of inclusion, in which items within the frame are perceived as contiguous and related, forming a “community”; and a fiction of exclusion, in which items outside the frame are relegated to silence and invisibility. Most of the instances of cultural production that I examine here are the work of gay white men, who had come to be so associated with AIDS precisely because of their discursive privilege relative to the cultural power of others affected by HIV/AIDS, a group that includes women, people of color, and drug users in significant numbers. In doing so, I am reflecting in part my own interests as a gay man affected by AIDS but also my access to this culture and its forms of cultural production. I will also try to resist representing New York’s gay male population as a single, monolithic “gay community,” an instrument of postmodern capitalism.⁴⁷ Just as the individual’s subjectivity is continuously performed within a variety of often competing and sometimes conflicting subject positions, so social groups continuously redefine their boundaries and alliances. If in the late eighteenth century, public anxieties and uncriticized representations could result in repressive Alien and Sedition Laws, the same anxieties were the occasion in the late twentieth century’s targeting of sexual dissidents. I also hope that this study will advance a therapeutic critique of one of America’s more troublesome semiotic systems, apocalyptic discourse. In order to do so, I have organized this book around four apocalyptic tropes: exile as the crisis inciting the apocalyptic imagination; the prophetic jeremiad with its threats of doom; the final battle between good and evil, Armageddon; and ultimate paradisaal bliss, configured in utopian and erotic terms.

In the next chapter, I will examine solo performance (perhaps the defining form of activist art in the late twentieth century) under the sign of exile (historically the disrupting catalyst for classic apocalyptic texts). Since World War II many queer people in “middle America” have experienced themselves as strangers in a strange land and Americans’ response to AIDS only served to increase that alienation. Performers like David

Drake and Tim Miller explored that marginalization in their work, and, with an evangelical fervor, performed their solo pieces in order to counteract the stigmatizing and immobilizing effects of alienation. Similarly, a novella by an older generation writer, James McCourt, depicted a solo performance artist whose monologue is a kind of apocalypse, a book of revelation. In this chapter, I account for the material differences in the physical or psychic spaces in which these texts are performed (contrasting Drake's West Village venue, Miller's East Village and on-the-road venues, and McCourt's mainstream publication, or audiences for performances and readers of novels) as one way of understanding the effects they achieve. By discussing theorists like Judith Butler, David Román, Ed Cohen, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Peggy Phelan, I also test some of the (frequently inflated) claims made by performance theory in order to critique or qualify those claims.

The third chapter discusses the work of novelist and playwright Larry Kramer in light of a uniquely American discourse, the jeremiad. The American jeremiad turns on a contradiction: the imaginary cultural identity that posits a monolithic aristocracy of virtue (American exceptionalism) and the material reality of competing constituencies with conflicting values (American individualism), a contradiction whose ancestry extends to the first Puritan settlements in North America. The jeremiad, as Sacvan Bercovitch demonstrates, is effective only by means of "normalizing crisis," which eventually also proves to be its own undoing, since individuals and collectives can remain fixed for only so long (unless they are "true believers"). As a result, like most preachers of the jeremiad sermon, Kramer blazed into the public scene of AIDS activism attracting tremendous attention, but flickered out later, now largely ignored. Kramer's use of this discursive form predated his AIDS activism and it is found in his 1978 novel, *Faggots*.

Perhaps nothing so typifies American apocalypticism as our tendency to configure "normalized crises" in terms of war. Thus the fourth chapter examines the trope of Armageddon and the ease with which competing interests during the AIDS epidemic employed martial figures in order to mobilize a collective response. This chapter examines a variety of such instances—among AIDS organizations and militant (the word is advised) activists, ACT UP and its allied groups, Lesbian Avengers, right wing Christians—but pays particular attention to the fiction, journalism, and activism of Sarah Schulman. While the mobilizing efficacy of such rhetoric is undeniable, its usefulness comes at a price, namely by inscribing a

fictional unity that erases important material differences among the constituencies working on behalf of AIDS treatment and prevention.

Finally, the end in classic apocalypses, the reward of the just, is imagined as a blissful union with divinity, a marriage of heaven and earth in the millennium. The fifth chapter examines tropes of sacred eros and millennialist ecstasy in two gay Jewish writers, Tony Kushner and Douglas Sadownick. Kushner and Sadownick both draw upon esoteric traditions—Jewish Kabbalah mysticism, Jungian alchemy, Neo-Platonism—that have antecedents in the early American Republic. Kushner’s “great work,” the epic plays that constitute *Angels in America*, perform what I call an “alchemy of symbolic capital” by their conjunction of disparate elements of American society in order to transmute them. If Kushner’s luminous angel is descended from American transcendental Romanticism, Sadownick’s leather “top” derives from our demonic or gothic Romanticism. In the novel *Sacred Lips of the Bronx* and in his nonfictional, obliquely Jungian *Sex Between Men: An Intimate History of the Sex Lives of Gay Men Postwar to Present*, Sadownick attempts to marry gay men’s fragmented selves into wholeness. Thus Kushner is Whitman to Sadownick’s Melville or Hawthorne. However, in both writers, the agenda is not simply a New Age narcissism, since their imaginations conceive an inclusive utopian politics.

Despite intellectuals’ post-Enlightenment modernist tendency to view apocalyptic discourses as ranting from the fringes of society, those discourses are in fact central to the American experience and are quite effective in composing individual and collective identities by bestowing a coherence on fragmentary experience and by endowing the mundane with cosmic significance. The object of this study is to interrogate the ways in which disparate constituencies uncritically mobilize themselves through this *habitus*.